

Chasing Chimeras

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/63117799) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/63117799>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandoms:	Wiedźmin The Witcher - All Media Types , The Witcher (TV) , Wiedźmin The Witcher (Video Game)
Relationship:	Geralt z Rivii Geralt of Rivia/Jaskier Dandelion
Character:	Original Witcher Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Work In Progress
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-02-16 Updated: 2025-02-17 Words: 3,531 Chapters: 2/?

Chasing Chimeras

by [tiny_snakes_in_cute_hats](#)

Summary

A village takes out a contract on a monster that's been killing travelers on the trade roads. Geralt of Rivia answers the hero's call to adventure because he is not the hero people need but the one they deserve. Also he needs money. Jaskier is there to write the next greatest ballad. Also he might be hiding from a very angry husband. They meet an unexpected ally who knows more about this monster than they're implying.

Notes

Never done this before. Please go easy on me.

Chapter 1

Old blood has a very particular smell. When I was a little girl, perhaps six or seven, I remember being ushered by the maid into my parent's bedroom to greet the new baby. Father was absent, as he was often want to be, away on business. So it fell to the oldest child to name the newest. Even if that child was me, a bastard. Mother had survived the birth, but it had been hard and taken a long time. She lay on old linen sheets her black hair fanned across the pillow, cheeks pale and eyes sunken. Looking like the black and white patterned silk scarf she was so proud of, if it had been crumpled up and carelessly tossed across the bed. The mid-wife was in the corner balling up the bed sheets, stained red. But older rags sat in a basin by the doorway; forgotten by the maid.

Dried blood flaking off drifting to the floor, the smell flooding my nose. Not the first time I smelled it in that room. That scent was ingrained in my memory.

I approached my mother first, to reassure myself that she still lived. She was asleep, her breath barely stirring the stray hair that lay across her mouth, stubbornly plastered to her sweaty brow.

"Let the missus sleep. She's had a hard time of it", whispered the maid.

"But I'm supposed to name the baby. Shouldn't Mother be awake when I name the child?" I whispered in kind.

"If it was a boy sure, but the child is a girl so it hardly matters."

The baby lay in its cradle.

The cradle hewn of dark wood to match the bed frame, with nonsense runes and sigils etched into its surface. To protect the babe and keep it healthy my mother had told, as she etched the marks herself. The biggest rune was inlaid instead of etched, composed of pale ash. It was supposed to grant the mother a son. But the cradle was old and scratched, dented near the bottom the sides worn smooth by hands used to rock it. Seven daughters my mother had given birth to. Myself the oldest and an easy birth and pregnancy both according to the aged maid. Her only easy birth. Each had been harder on my mother and it seemed, on the babes. Of the girls my mother had, only me and three of my sisters still lived.

And now she had had another one, which made eight. My father had stopped coming to name the babies after the fourth one. Not that it had mattered the last two times, with the babes dying hours after being born. I looked down at the newest member of the family. The baby was tightly swaddled, or maybe she was just that small. Too small.

The predator within me salivated hungry for easy prey kept at bay only by my nausea and horror at the thought of eating my own sibling. Even at that tender age, I knew the hungry creature within me wasn't normal. My siblings never seemed to get antsy around the full moon. Never tore at their skin with bitten down nails. Never knew who walked into the room even before they entered by the sound of their foot fall. Never knew when our father visited the widow on the corner by the scent that lingered on his clothes smelled across the room. The beast within told me that this child wouldn't survive either. Urged me to eat her while she was still warm.

"Her name is Ada. She will be buried in the garden at the back of the house with the others when she passes," I said solemnly.

The last child I had named Ava, and the one before Eva. And before that Eve. I looked at Ada one more time before I left to go play with my toys. If I stayed away too long my sisters

would hide them from me entertained by how I could always find them.

The mid-wife made the sign to ward off evil at me, thinking I had just cursed the baby, and watched me with suspicious eyes until I left. I heard the last quiet breath given by too small lungs through the closed door.

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The dusty road in front of me was far removed from that cramped bedroom and graying memory but the smell was the same. A man lay strewn across the dirt road, a broken rag doll. His neck at an unnatural angle, empty sockets facing me, while the rest of his body embraced the path. An upturned wagon lay 20 paces off the road, cargo scattered everywhere. Before the famine, I'd be a good samaritan, trying to search for the other owner of the wagon. I'd be using my sensitive ears, to try to pinpoint her in the wreckage, to see if she was clinging to life and needed help. But the person I was before the famine was dead, her morality faded away with the fat on her body.

The scents that saturated the air indicated the other owner of the belongings was long past helping and couldn't protest my thievery. According to evidence of scavengers, and my own sensitive nose the wagon and its former occupants had been lying here since yesterday.

These days when I came across such a scene I searched for anything that was worth selling the next town over. Unfortunately the cargo wasn't very promising for resale. Not a merchant's cargo, or supplies for the local town that lay three miles ahead. No, it was the lifetime belongings of a family moving house, clothes, pots and pans. Prized pieces of furniture smashed by the roadside, wedding plates and silverware muddily pressed into the earth from last night's hungry visitors.

Rounding the side of the wagon, was the woman, head smashed by the knocked over wagon, her belly torn open. Further under the wagon lay a small child, skin still warm. Died from dehydration, perhaps a couple of hours ago. Guess my nose had been wrong. No need to help anyone then.

"Sorry for what happened. I hope you're not suffering anymore, please don't mind me."

The child didn't reply, and neither did the woman's ghost, they had moved on to the next plane of existence. Less trouble for me, I didn't want to encounter any vengeful wraiths while pilfering the dead's belongings.

It had rained that morning and the day before, but the sun was strong for late autumn and the muddy ground was slowly but surely drying out, trapping human footprints, animal tracks and wheel ruts. Wild dogs had chewed on the woman, torn open the bags of salted meat.

Crows had chewed on the travelers bread, and any soft exposed tissue. But trouble still lingered in the air. The humans and their unwelcome visitors weren't the only tracks scattered around.

Large tracks of some creature were impressed deep into the earth, almost as deep as the tracks from the wagon wheels. The unnatural scent of a monster burned my nostrils, tugging at some instinctive core that told me to flee the area. A smell of brimstone and something lingering sickly sweet in the damp air.

The family meeting an ill fate on the road had been no accident. They had been hunted. By a monster who had waited until the heavy laden wagon had gotten stuck in the soggy soil before striking. One who had a taste for human flesh. Of the two cart horses that had been used to pull the wagon, one lay on its side, bloated in death, its neck broken similarly to the man. But there were no marks to indicate the beast had tried to eat it. Even the wild dogs and crows had given up on the animal without a larger predator to open the hide for them. Only

the woman had been consumed. And only partly. Her rib cage cracked, ripped apart with enormous claws marking the bone. The only sign left of the monster's hunger, as the scavengers had taken full advantage of the opening and consumed anything left inside. Monsters always meant trouble. Like called to like and if I lingered here my own scent would soon mingle with the others and draw unwanted attention. I'd want to get out of here quickly with my prizes without being slowed by the weight of my stolen goods. On the other hand, a monster who was so choosy in its prey was unlikely to return to the area. Still, I would like to lighten my burden for the next three miles. I turned my attention to the last set of animal tracks, that of the remaining cart horse. They led deeper into the woods the tracks spaced far apart the animal galloping. The horses had been un-tethered from the wagon and tried to run at the first sign of trouble. With luck I was about to lighten my burdens and laden my belly.

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Crushed branches and heavy hoof prints made an easy trail to follow. But the scent of horse and that of its partner's blood meant I could have found the animal blind. Convincing the animal to come with me had been a more difficult. The animal could tell I wasn't quite human, and seemed wary of my approach. But spending the night in the woods, soaked from the rain, streaked with dried blood, and listening for predators seemed to have broken its spirits. All I'd had to do was offer a dried apple from my pack to win its loyalty. Convincing it to not run from me once I led it back to the scene of the attack was much harder. The creature kept tossing its head trying to break free from where I had tied it to a nearby branch whining in fear. Making an unholy racket that pierced my sensitive ears. "Would you shut the fuck up? I can't hear if anyone is approaching from the road! The monster isn't coming back, and I can hardly defend us against scavengers if they sneak up on us due to your ungodly noises!"

The horse didn't calm down so I was forced to ignore the annoyance while trying to fill a sack with trade-able valuables.

Rule #1 of stealing from the dead: Don't take anything too recognizable. You never knew when you might come across the deceased's relatives. And grave robbing was a capital offense. That meant the late woman's jewelry and nicest dress were out. But also her tortoiseshell brush and her silver snuff box.

Rule #2: Don't take anything personal that could have strong memories. If the dead person died violently enough their spirit might claw its way back to the world of the living as a wraith. I wasn't dealing with that shit. So instead I was stuffing wedding plates into my bag, spaced out by clean lingerie. No one ever recognized a dead person's unmentionables save maybe their spouses. And people were always ready to pay well for silk. Relatives couldn't describe marriage plates, at least, that had been my experience in my nontraditional career. But people did want nice plates to feed their guests with.

Trying to ensure fine china didn't break took a lot of concentration. And the silence of the horse was a quiet relief I didn't immediately notice until that silence began to linger.

Glancing over my shoulder at the horse didn't assuage my worry. The animal was alive behaving irregularly, its limbs locked its eyes white, barely breathing in puffs of air.

The muddy ground was an unexpected blessing as the squelch off a slipping paw was all the warning I received before the ghoul attacked.

Chapter 2

I'd like to say that I did something bad-ass when I noticed the monster's presence. Said something calm and collected like, "Damn you're ugly".

Instead I let out a yelp equivalent to a kicked dog while slipping in the muddy ground trying to get my feet under me. That was my second stroke of luck, as falling face first into the mud allowed the ghoul to sail straight, over missing me.

The best way to deal with ghouls was to hire a witcher, and let him hack at the problem with his silver sword. The second best way to deal with ghouls was to do whatever was necessary to survive the encounter.

Ghouls weren't particularly fast and they weren't the strongest monster, but the real danger lay in their bite. Necrophages were the bullfrogs of the monster world. They would eat anything that would fit in their mouths. Which meant if one was to get bit by a ghoul, anything from rotten human flesh to fiend dung would end up in the wound.

And though my peculiar senses were enhanced, my healing wasn't. If I got bit by a ghoul it would be the end. Either by dying under its teeth or by dying from infection of a rotting wound once I limped away from the fight.

Time seemed to slow as I frantically looked for something that I could use as a weapon. The ghoul shaking off its confusion turned to face me, gaping its mouth to let out a horrendous shriek.

The cart horse let out a scream of its own, struggling to snap the branch it was tied to. The sharp noise snatched the ghoul's attention, so I sprinted to the tossed trunk.

Ten paces felt like a thousand, the air thickening like honey. In the filthy dirt lay the family's silver, abandoned in my earlier search. 'Too expensive to sell, too much of a hassle to pick up.'

Now it was my best hope. The ghoul's attention whipped back to me, instinct to attack fleeing prey insurmountable. I flung my self into the dirt, the scent of rotting flesh overwhelming, my eyes watering, heart pounding. Grasping a piece of silver felt like sticking my hand in an open flame.

Rolling onto my back I blindly thrust upwards praying to Melitele that the other end was true silver as well. The weight of the ghoul sinking onto the end of my improvised spear pressed the handle further into my hand, my bare skin blistering from the metal.

Teeth snapped inches above my face, rancid saliva rolling down my cheek. My vision blurred, unable to get enough fresh air, the monster clawing at the earth tearing up clumps of clod as it tried to get traction.

It took all my strength to hook my legs around the back of the ghoul. Flipping it, and in doing so placing myself on top. With the space I'd made it was clear to see that I'd failed to puncture anything vital. The ghoul was very much alive and seemed eager to return damage in kind.

But one thing I learned on the road was hesitation got you killed. Not able to take advantage of the silver's current location, I abandoned it in the creature's body and grabbed a new piece of silver. This time my aim was true, sinking straight to the heart.

Concept was easier than practice. Reading a book stolen from the alchemist's shop could tell me where a ghoul's heart was, but it couldn't tell me the sheer amount of force one needed to pierce it.

The ghoul bucked me off, the panicked swipe of its claws catching my airborne form and sent me flying into the broken cabinet.

"Ow, that really hurts!"

Ghouls apparently, also are schooled not to hesitate. Freeing itself the monster immediately righted and whirled to face me again. Instead of killing it, I'd just managed to piss it off.

Now I was too far away to grab anymore silverware, not that my hands could grasp it, the reddened skin sloughing off my palms. I scrambled away. My left leg throbbing painfully in time with my heart, refusing to support me.

'Was this to be the end? All that pain and hunger I endured, meaningless as I died alone on the side of the road?'

The Beast trapped in my head struggled against the chains I'd erected. A mindless fury focused on the creature that dared to attack, dared to injure. It was eat or be eaten. I closed my eyes, and let go of reins sacrificing control to the darkness that lurked within.

Waking up covered in blood wasn't a surprise anymore. It happened after every full moon once I reached the age of twelve. Sometimes it was my own, if I'd managed to trap myself. Covered in claw marks and bites I'd awaken, finger tips coated in the substance. Locking myself in a cellar or chaining myself to a tree usually sufficed to holding me. Sometimes the blood was an animals. Once I'd woken up surrounded by six dead rabbits. I don't know if the Beast had found a warren nearby, or had killed each one and left them under the tree for me to find. The rusted chains I used had failed and I'd decided to be grateful that it I'd woke up in the same place. I'd found new chains.

One time the cellar door of an abandoned hovel had broken, weakened by neglect and time. I'd woken up in that cellar, birds singing, a clear view of the bright blue sky. Uninjured, and for once sated, no inner hunger nudging me to wakefulness. The Beast lay dormant not vying for freedom. Peaceful.

Until I felt the dampness resting against my bare foot. Turning to look and seen the puddle of blood glimmering in the sun, the edges clotting. A pair of boots resting beside it. Large boots of fine tanned leather, barley worn. Boots that were not my own. I hadn't searched the shadows of the cellar to see the source of the puddle. Like a coward I had fled. Only stopping to grab my pack and redress outside.

Waking up in blood wasn't odd. But waking up painfully was. My leg was quick to remind me it was broken. The throbbing pain had morphed into a biting one. Unfortunately the rest of me hadn't been spared. The palms of my hands had clotted, the skin sore and stiff trying to scar there. Injuries from silver were ones my body prioritized.

The rest of me was black and blue. Sprained fingers on my right hand and bruised ribs along my left side. Blood leaked into my eye from a deep cut through my eyebrow. I'd almost lost my right eye. My arms felt like jelly, strained. Every breath hurt as I struggled back to my feet.

Like a loyal dog, the Beast had left a gift at my feet. The ghoul was covered in nicks and cuts that barely penetrated its hide. Deep bruising mottled its svelte hide, bleeding under its skin. To my left was the cart wheel, several spokes had been broken off. And found there home in the ghoul. I wasn't an expert, but the dent in its skull could have been cause of death.

The ghoul lay dead from blunt form trauma administered by a wagon wheel.

"What did I do to deserve this!?" The gods didn't deign to answer.

Stumbling towards the next village, my leg splinted with a clean spoke from the wagon wheel, took most of the day. It took a long time to convince the horse that it was within its best interest to come with me. It cost me two more dried apples. To celebrate our survival I named her Flower. The animal didn't even pretend to be grateful to have a name.

Lucky for me, or maybe unluckily, the villagers didn't care about my injuries. No food nor aid was offered, but they let me lay out my wares and approached to buy. And to haggle. Hardened house wives hoping for an easy target.

The sun sank low in the sky. My blanket mostly empty, my wares thoroughly looked over. I would discard whatever hadn't sold in the midden heap when it was fully dark. Injured as I was, I still didn't plan to spend the night here. This village was too close to the upturned wagon and after the fight with the ghoul. The churned up ground, empty cabinet drawers and my injuries would be too suspicious to let me linger. I'd go to the next town over. Seven miles. I'd never been grateful to a horse before but with my broken leg, I was converted.

"Let me start packing up and we'll get going, Flower", I murmured to the horse.

The horse ignored me. After we had managed to get to town the horse, I'd dubbed Flower, had wanted nothing to do with me. Well that was just too bad for Flower.

The local guards emerged from the alley across from me. Calling them guards was being generous with the word. They were village men who kept order and mediated problems in the

village in exchange for paying less taxes. Which meant they were unpaid, often bored, and happy to harass travelers for drinking money.

And here I was unable to make a run for it.

“You there! Do you have a permit?”

Uh oh.

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